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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: RIVER WARS IN THE FARC'S HEARTLAND

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Milton K. Drucker
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) To cut guerrilla supply lines and interdict narcotraffic, riverine battalions of Colombian Marines (COLMAR) are fighting to take control of nearly 8,000 miles of inland waterways. The tough river environment gives inherent tactical advantages to the FARC, but the COLMAR is building more defensible patrol craft and mobile forward bases, as well as developing surveillance technologies, to improve its offensive capabilities. Continued U.S. support, from equipment to training, is vital in helping to win this fight, particularly at a time when the COLMAR appears to be under threat of cutbacks. End Summary.

Vast Coca Highways

¶2. (C) Running more than 7,800 miles through five major river basins, Colombia's inland waters are key territory for the Colombian military to control in their fight against drugs and guerrillas. The Pacific Coast alone counts more than 32 navigable rivers. In vast, underdeveloped areas of Colombia's outlying departments, rivers are the main highways for commerce and communications. Rivers are the FARC's supply lifelines for food, medicines, and arms; narcotraffickers use them to move precursor chemicals in and coca out, in craft from large boats to canoes. The GOC's commitment to fight illegal groups in the heartland requires the military to take control of these routes. Five years ago, the COLMAR was unable to reach most of them. A two-day lag time to assist victims of a 2002 FARC massacre at Bojaya, Choco, focused attention on the problem. The COLMAR now claims coverage, but not control, of 5,000 miles of Colombia's waterways.

Riverine Battalions: Stretching for Coverage

¶3. (C) The COLMAR's eight riverine battalions conduct a range of duties from combat to civil affairs:

- Landing, offensive assault, and combat

- Troop transport and supply for Colombian Army operations
- Patrol of rivers, including escort of tankers
- Interdiction checkpoints; boarding, search, and seizure
- Disaster relief and humanitarian aid to remote areas
- Mobile radio broadcasting to encourage guerrilla desertions
- Intelligence gathering from civilian informant networks

Resources are overstretched. While Colombia has on paper the second largest marine corps in the world, two-thirds of its officer and NCO billets are vacant. Troops work a grueling schedule of 100 days deployed aboard small craft, followed by 15 days of rest on base. (This compares to a U.S. 30/7 rotation.) COLMAR accounts for 85 percent of Colombian Navy personnel, but it receives a minor share of COLNAV funding. Its staff is frequently drawn down for land-based policing duties.

Riverine Warfare Favors the FARC

¶4. (C) Rivers offer substantial advantages to the enemy. They are unpredictable, shifting courses and changing depths (by up to 12 feet) with rain and tidal flows. Obstacles such as shallows, sand bars, and plant debris limit maneuverability on narrow tributaries. Dense jungle cuts the range of radio communications, limiting the ability to penetrate land on the banks. Logistics hurdles and long supply lines hamper extending operations forward. While doctrine requires land troops to vary routes, COLMAR riverine patrol routes are predictable, with obvious choke points. River patrols are highly vulnerable to ambush, either by coordinated fire from both banks or by detonation of explosive charges. While COLMAR boats are fully exposed mid-river, the FARC and ELN are protected by trenches, trees, and civilian homes. For these reasons, the COLMAR have historically suffered high casualty rates, earning them the grim nickname "formol" (embalming fluid for corpses).

COLMAR R&D: Advanced Boats, Mobile Bases, UAVs

¶5. (C) To improve their odds in riverine operations, the COLNAV has created a subsidiary (<http://www.cotecmar.com>) to develop and build advanced river craft ('NODRIZA') as support hubs for its Vietnam era patrol boats. First designed in 2000 for logistical support (ferrying provisions and troops upriver), the NODRIZA class has since evolved into a multi-purpose platform for both defensive protection and offensive operations. The latest model is faster and more maneuverable, fully armored to protect troops, carries eight weapon stations to repel attacks, and has a helicopter landing pad. Built far more cheaply (\$8 million) than competing U.S. craft, the NODRIZA is a unique innovation with export potential. Less high-tech but equally important are mobile bases. These floating docking stations function as patrol elements, enabling the COLMAR to sustain presence in remote locations. With these docking stations as mobile hubs, and the NODRIZA as a 'mother ship' operating on primary rivers, the next challenge is to develop a class of smaller, faster boats capable of pursuing illegal traffic along minor tributaries.

¶6. (C) To minimize vulnerability to FARC attacks, the best defense is offense -- via intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). In sparsely populated areas where human informants are few, the military must rely mainly on technical means to locate enemy forces. The most promising new technologies are unmanned aerial and surface vehicles (UAVs, USVs) and fixed ground / maritime sensors (UGSs), all remote controlled devices that transmit real-time images of enemy movements. With UAVs, the COLMAR could overfly river banks looking for ambushes; with USVs it could remotely interrogate suspect traffic; and UGSs could alert it to passing boats. The COLMAR currently has two UAV systems in development, and the U.S. Navy is donating two surplus USVs.

U.S. Training: Combat, Logistics, Personnel

¶7. (C) Aside from boat and USV donations, U.S. contributions to the COLMAR are primarily training. Given the rigor of riverine operations, combat training ranges from basic training to more advanced, special forces instruction. Logistics assistance is of equal urgency, especially to fuel and resupply forward locations upriver. The COLMAR suffers chronic fuel shortages and lacks a professional fuels management organization to protect fuel quality and manage its distribution. Engine maintenance, repair, and spare parts inventory are also spotty, sometimes crippling operational readiness rates. Finally, fundamental changes are needed to COLMAR doctrine with respect to career tracks -- to define specializations, ensure continuity of skills, and decrease command level churn. U.S. Army South (USARSO) is working with the COLMIL to upgrade its personnel management systems in these aspects.

Future Outlook Is Uncertain

¶8. (C) Despite the COLMAR's innovative efforts to develop indigeneous crafts and technologies appropriate for riverine warfare, its future is uncertain. As a component of the Colombian Navy, the COLMAR is vulnerable to interservice rivalry with its dominant blue-water sibling. The COLNAV controls budgets, recruitment, and training, as well as promotion of senior officers. COLMAR comprises 85 percent of Navy personnel; it is selected for fewer than ten percent of Navy flag officers and receives a minor share (perhaps 20 or 30 percent) of Navy budgets. Early indications are that even those budgets may be cut in the coming fiscal year. Further, the new 'wealth tax' for defense spending allocates 96 percent of the Navy's budget to open-water expenditures (frigates, submarines, and the like), while only four percent is allocated to riverine operations. Riverine investment accounts for only \$6 million in an overall budget of \$3.15 billion. We will continue to support the COLMAR riverine effort, not only with equipment and training, but in encouraging the Colombians to provide the COLAR with the resources needed to perform its duties.

DRUCKER